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ABSTRACT

Historically, the Black Church was culturally responsive to the needs of their community. In order to meet the needs of African American adult learners, the church had to assume many roles one of which was that of educator. Like many informal institutions of learning, the Black Church has been overlooked as a site for adult education research. Ten sermons of African-American preachers were analyzed to identify culturally relevant themes and their applicability for use in adult education classrooms. These five themes that relate to different aspects of African American life were revealed: (1) self-ethnic personalities/experiences; (2) self-ethnic social experiences; (3) self-ethnic psycho-cultural; (4) Africentric affirmations; and (5) self-ethnic metaphors. These conclusions were drawn from the thematic analyses: (1) African American sermons can provide adult educators with culturally relevant names that reflect self-ethnic personalities with which learners can identify; (2) negative self-ethnic social and psycho-cultural experiences of learners can be mitigated by educators made more aware; and (3) the polyrhythmic cadence of African-American sermons grow out of an oral tradition; and (4) affirmation themes are one way to mitigate against negative self-image. (A glossary of the five themes is included. The bibliography lists 27 references). (AJ)

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The African American Sermon as an Exemplar of Culturally Relevant Adult Education

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Abstract: Historically, through different avenues, the Black Church has been culturally responsive to the needs of African American learners. One such avenue has been the African American sermon. The purpose of this study was to conduct a contextual analysis of African American sermons to identify culturally relevant themes and their applicability for use in adult education classrooms.

Introduction

There has been a proliferation in the adult education literature relative to cultural relevancy. Educators have realized what the African American preacher has known all along--you have to meet learners where they are. This, from an educational standpoint, means providing culturally relevant education during the learning experience. An examination of African American sermons provides useful methods of incorporating cultural relevancy in the learning process.

Cultural Relevancy

Most discussions of culturally relevant adult education (CRAE) include the importance of using materials and examples that are relevant to the learner and incorporating aspects of the learner's culture into the educational process (Colin, 1989; Guy, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Martin, 1990; Sheared, 1994). In her discussion of CRAE, Colin introduces the concept of self-ethnic reflectors. "Reflectors" are described as curricula, philosophy, activities, events and personalities in the educational literature. In other words, African Americans must see a representation of themselves. Failure to use such techniques can perpetuate negative attitudes and feelings among learners. As Guy (1999) succinctly points out, incorporating CRAE in the learning process enhances learners' self-image by allowing learners to see themselves in a positive light and empowers them to challenge the authority and power of the dominant culture. Effective adult educators should not only know the learners and their cultural background, they should also use the knowledge of the learners in such a way that is effective and creative during the learning process (Ladson-Billings, 1994). This goes beyond including a name or event in African American history. It includes incorporating contemporary, real-life experiences that are reflective of the learners' culture, values, and social and intellectual histories (Colin, 1989). Culturally relevant adult education is essential to helping learners from marginalized cultural backgrounds learn to take control of their lives and improve their social condition.

African American and adult educators from other ethnic backgrounds are to be commended for bringing issues of cultural relevancy to the forefront of the minds of adult

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educators. However, the Black Church, by its very nature has been providing for hundreds of years, and no better place is it manifested than in the African American sermon. As members of the African American culture, preachers have long realized the importance of using learners' experiences to aid in the uplift of a people whose "daily existence was an encounter with the overwhelming and brutalizing reality of white power" (Cone, 1989, p. 92) and who were responding to suffering and suppression. Davis (1985) points out that African American preachers are pressured to make sermons that relate to contemporary issues of African Americans. As such, there is much we can glean about employing cultural relevancy in adult education. The impetus for cultural relevancy in the African American sermon is predicated on the history of the Black Church, which is discussed in the next section.

The Black Church

The Black Church is an institution that continues to play an important role in the African American community by promoting racial awareness and identity, political socialization, and psychosocial well being (Ellison & Sherkat, 1995). It is characterized by the fact that its African American members are bound together in the struggle for equality and freedom (Misap, 1994). Among other things, the church has been a cultural and educational center in the African American community (Wheeler, 1986). With its primary focus on the welfare of African Americans, the church has been a place for them to have their human worth and dignity reaffirmed and a place for them to garner strength to survive in an oppressive society (Wiggins, 1995). The church recognizes and appreciates its African ancestry, understands the impact slavery in America has had on it, and is sensitive to the on-going forms of racism with which it has had to address (Henry, 1990).

In order to meet the diverse needs of adult learners of the African Diaspora, the church had to assume many roles. One such role was that of educator. A review of the literature reveals a wide array of learning opportunities for African Americans in the Black Church. The educational torch that shined so brightly in the historical Black Church continues to illuminate among its successors today. It is not unusual to find adult educational activities taking place seven days a week in today's Black Church. However, despite its rich tradition of church-sponsored adult education, the full extent of its participation in adult education has "been conspicuously absent in the annals of history" (Kirkwood, 2001, p. 84).

The African American Sermon

Although much has been written about the music of the Black Church and its importance in the worship experience, it is the African American sermon that is the most important element of the worship experience (LaRue, 2000; Lincoln & Mayima, 1993; Mitchell, 1990; Rowland, 1998). Each week millions of African Americans rely on the preacher's sermon to render messages of hope and affirmation. The sermon has drawn heavily on the oral traditions and literature of the African culture. According to Courlander (1976), black oral literature has a special personality and often contains "implicit or explicit intellectual or emotional responses to the injustices and inequalities inherent in the historic relationship of blacks to the mainstream culture" (p. 256). He further explains that much of the African American oral literature is a manifestation "of life in the cities, and reflects the struggles—and sometimes the triumphs—of the

individual in the midst of a world he never made" (p. 257). According to Stansfield (1994), it is possible to use data from oral traditions to track the quality of life experiences of those living in poor African American communities. The oral tradition has contributed to the unique elements of the African American sermon.

Davis (1985) states, "The performed African-American sermon is a narrative system which incorporates rationalized sets of conventions and principles designed to support the articulation of existence, belief, and cosmologic considerations in the experiencing lives of African-American people" (p. 67). The African American preacher employs imagery and sounds to awaken the senses and move the churchgoer from listener to active participant.

According to Mitchell (1990), there are four commonalities to the African American sermon. They are textual, expositional, narrative, and metaphor. Massey (1980) describes the textual sermon as "a design determined mainly by the divisions or sequences of thought in a single text or short passage from Scripture" (p. 117). The textual sermon builds on the mental imagery of the text. The second form is expositional and is essentially an extended passage of scripture (Massey). Thus, the expositional sermon is based on one central theme found within the scriptures. The narrative/storytelling sermon compares to a work of art and as Mitchell suggests, there is no negotiation with the biblical accuracy of the sermon. The metaphor sermon builds upon one central figure or metaphor.

It is fitting to use sermons of African American preachers as exemplary cases of cultural relevancy. They have used sermons as a sense-maker and meaning-maker for people's lives (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994).

Methodology

For this study we analyzed sermons using theme or content analysis. Theme analysis is the "process of recovering the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 78). In providing a framework for understanding what themes are and are not, he further identifies four essential aspects of the "theme": (a) Theme is the experience of focus, of meaning, of point; (b) theme formulation is at best a simplification; (c) themes are not objects one encounters at certain points or moments in a text; and (d) theme is the form of capturing the phenomenon one tries to understand (p. 87). According to Merriam and Simpson (1995), content analysis establishes "the frequency of certain ideas, attitudes, or words within a particular body of material" (p. 81). Thus using this methodology, we analyzed sermons of ten African American preachers; five from the 19th century and five from the 20th century from LaRue's (2000) book entitled *The Heart of Black Preaching*, to see what culturally relevant commonalities emerged.

Findings

An analysis of the ten sermons revealed five themes 1) Self-ethnic Personalities/Experiences, 2) Self ethnic social experiences, 3) Self-ethnic psycho-cultural, 4) Africentric affirmations, and 5) Self-ethnic metaphors. The themes relate to different aspects of African American life and realities.

Self-ethnic Personalities/Experiences

A common practice among African American preachers is to mention names of people and places throughout their sermons. Not only do they use names of biblical characters from the Bible, they also use names of living and celebrated people of African descent. Many of the sermons examined used names of historical and present-day figures that most African Americans would be familiar with.

Self ethnic Social Experiences

A very important aspect of providing cultural relevancy is to recognize and appreciate the learners' experiences. The African American sermon provides numerous examples of the African American experience in America. For example, in one sermon, listeners are reminded how "African American males find it hard to function adequately as males because of the hell they live in" (LaRue, 2000, p. 217). In another sermon, the preacher relates the experiences of the people of Israel to the struggles of African Americans. However, the preacher is careful in her critique of Europeans and their tradition but readily points out she is talking about the "greatness that the Bible says is in all of us who claim to be the people of God" (LaRue, p. 224).

Self-ethnic Psycho-cultural

People of African descent have continually received negative messages about themselves. According to Akbar (1996), the scant number of powerful and dignified images of African Americans in the media and the community as a whole reduces their sense of self-respect. Woodson (1931) pointed out that the worst kind of lynching for African American students was to handicap them for life by teaching them their black faces were a curse and that their struggle to change their condition was hopeless. This kind of teaching, according to Woodson, killed their aspirations. To that end, it is important for preachers to deliver sermons that reverse the negative mindset that has stifled the African American community. Therefore, it is not surprising that many sermons provide illustrative examples of the psychological and cultural experiences of African Americans.

Africentric Affirmations

While the African American preacher is careful to bring to the forefront the negative experiences of African Americans, he or she is also skillful in affirming them. In a sermon entitled *What Makes You so Strong?*, the preacher reminds listeners of how they have been successful in spite of the injustices they have been dealt. In yet another sermon, listeners are challenged to affirm that "our blackness is a blessing and not a curse; that the white man can't save us-we must do it ourselves; that our women want, deserve and need our respect" (p. 218). This certainly would make one feel proud to be African American, hence, affirming the learners' cultural heritage.

Self-ethnic Metaphors

African American sermons are replete with metaphors. An analysis of the 19th century sermons illustrates their importance and significance from years gone by. Metaphors are used to bring life or imagery to certain text and give emphasis to the meaning of sermons. It should be noted that many of the sermons reviewed used metaphors as a way to bring the sermon to life for the listener/reader. For example, the castration of the black male in slavery is compared to the dehumanizing castration of the black male character today.

Conclusion

Adult educators have been successful in promoting cultural relevance in the field adult of education (Colin, 1994; Colin & Guy, 1998; Guy, 1996; Sheared, 1994). And while much can be learned from the literature relative to the topic, the Black Church presents a unique opportunity for those seeking insight into the psychosocial and educational culture of the African American as well as his or her religious beliefs. The Black Church and the African American sermon are replete with illustrative examples of cultural relevancy. However, the Black Church, like most informal institutions of learning, is often overlooked as a site for adult education research (Isaac, 1999; Misap, 1994; Rowland, 1998). Adult educators can learn from African American sermons by providing culturally relevant names that reflect selfethnic personalities that the learners can identify with. In addition, they can draw upon the selfethnic social and psycho-cultural experiences of learners whether they are positive or negative. Furthermore, adult educators can employ the use of Africentric affirmations to affirm and empower the polyrhythmic realities (Sheared, 1994) of learners and their cultural experiences. The African American sermon is part art, poetry, and music in drawing upon the oratorical skills of the preacher to enhance learning and remembrance of lessons learned.

Many adult educators are unaware of the use of the African American sermon as an educational tool. Yet when fiction and non-fiction literary writing are used to inform or stimulate discussion around topics embedded in a culturally relevant text, adult educators may discover a valuable tool for teaching and learning. It is evident that the Black Church, and the African American preacher and sermon can affect learners' emotions and this may be a way to facilitate learning, attitudinal change, and personal development for those who work for inclusion and struggle with diversity.

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